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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the reasons women return to school and the services which they demand as reentry students. The respondents represented female students, undergraduate and graduate, 25 years of age and older, at five institutions in four states. Of 419 surveys distributed, 383 were returned, for a response rate of 91 percent. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The Contingency Coefficient was used for analysis of the relationship of discrete nominal variables. The findings revealed that the reasons these adult women gave for attending college differed from the reasons of traditional-aged students. A picture emerged of active women with little extra time to incorporate day-time college attendance. These women appeared to need emotional support and prudent academic advisement. Services required included facilities to care for young children and other ministrations which are generally less in demand by the traditional-aged full-time day student. The results of the study are significant in that they highlight the emerging reality of the needs of the growing mature student cohort. Higher education administrators and educators must reshape and refine the academic environment to accommodate this growing student constituency. (Author/NB)

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A Profile of Adult Women Students:
The Emerging Cohort in Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the reasons women returned to school and the services which they are demanding as reentry students. The respondents represented female students, undergraduate and graduate, twenty-five years of age and older at five institutions in four states. Of 419 surveys distributed, 383 were returned, for a response rate of 91 percent.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The Contingency Coefficient was used for analysis of the relationship of discrete nominal variables. A discussion is provided for all relationships of .3 and above. Findings are also reported in descriptive format.

The reasons these adult women attend college differ from the traditional-aged student. A picture emerged of active women with little extra time to incorporate day-time college attendance. These women need emotional support and prudent academic advisement. Services required include facilities to care for young children and other ministrations which are generally less in demand by the traditional-aged full-time day student.

The results of this study are significant in that they highlight the emerging reality of the needs of the growing mature student cohort. Higher education administrators and educators must reshape and refine the academic environment to accomodate this growing student constituency.

A PROFILE OF ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS:
THE EMERGING COHORT IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

As we look at our college campuses, we have no doubt that the characteristics of our student population are changing. Numerous statistics demonstrate that the adult student cohort is gaining as the traditional age students decline in number (Daniels, 1988: Hughes, 1983: Wheaton and Fobinson, 1983: Wolfgang and Dowling, 1981).

In the New York Times (Grown-Up Boomers, 1987), it was shown that in 1985 as compared to 1972, there was a 53 percent increase in students 25-29 years old: 122 percent increase in students 30-34 years old and a 112 percent increase in students 35 years of age and older. Overall, in 1985, there were 4.7 million adult students, and it was projected that by 1991 there will be 5.8 million individuals over 25 years of age in full-time or part-time college programs. In fact, the number of adults taking undergraduate or graduate courses for credit has currently risen 114 percent since 1970 to 5.1 million -- or 42 percent of the nation's 12.2 million college students according to the Federal Department of Education (Daniels, 1988, p. 6).

Likewise, Brodzinski (cited in Hughes, 1983) claims that by 1995 "there will be a twenty percent drop in the number of 18 to 24 year olds from the 1980 levels" (p. 51).

According to 1973 census data, women comprised 40 percent of the enrollment by older college students, while in 1985 that statistic rose to 55 percent (Rubin, 1985, p. 33); and in 1988, women now represent 58 percent of of all adult college students (Daniels, 1988, p. 18).

In a report by the American Council on Education (1987), figures show that between 1974 and 1984 enrollment of women students increased by 37 percent while enrollment of men increased by only 3.5 percent. Those same figures show that part-time students increased by 32.6 percent while full-time students increased only by 10.2 percent. Students of the 25-34 year age group increased by 36.9 percent and students age 35 and older increased by 41 percent. Overall, enrollment of women in higher education increased at a rate nine times that of men between 1974 and 1984.

These adult learners, both men and women alike, fall into one of two major categories: (1) those students who have never before attended institutions of higher education or (2) those students who are re-entries, having "stopped-out" of college at a younger age.

The reasons mature learners return to the classroom vary although the goals of the non-traditional student entering the college classroom are related to several factors:

1. More individuals are being displaced by declining industries, i.e. steelworkers, autoworkers, etc. They require further training or re-training to continue their

employability:

2. Single parents in search of a career require at least elementary levels of education or training to enter the job market initially;
3. Today's escalating costs necessitate a two-income family;
4. As technology advances, currency is essential. As Naisbitt noted in his book, Megatrends, (1982, p. 24), "scientific and technical information now increases 13 percent a year, which means it doubles every 5.5 years. But the rate will soon jump to perhaps 40 percent per year because of new, more powerful information systems and an increasing population of scientists. That means data will double every twenty months";
5. Both men and women are experiencing a heightened sense of individuality;
6. The "empty nest syndrome", which occurs as children grow up and leave home, propels parents to investigate other fulfilling opportunities; and
7. Adult students see the value in serving as a role model for their children in their display of interest for higher education.

Providing Conducive Learning Environments

With the complex set of social systems confronting the adult learner and multiple commitments to employment, family, and school, educators and administrators need to become aware of the differences in the non traditional student's needs, satisfiers and dissatisfiers in higher education. Advocacy and support are necessary in areas traditionally available to the full-time day students, but usually lacking for the non-traditional evening student. Service offices such as admissions, registration, records, career and academic counseling, the bookstore and library must offer hours convenient for the evening student. Other barriers to overcome include the lack of financial aid for the adult learners and further examination of classroom strategies incorporating theories of adult learning styles. In addition, higher education professionals must also examine the gender differences as they affect these policy decisions. Colleges and universities must provide:

- easier access to higher education through simplified admissions and registration procedures;
- opportunities to take classes with other adult students;
- flexibility in class scheduling including evening and weekend classes;
- peer support groups;

- credit for non-sponsored prior experiential learning; and
- sufficient academic counseling and personal guidance, including workshops on such topics as study skills, test taking, and time management.

Malin, et.al. (cited in Kirk and Dorfman, 1983) "found that satisfaction with college facilities (including advisement and counseling, degree requirements and curriculum, instruction, scheduling and financial aid) is a major predictor of satisfaction in college" (p. 17). Attraction to the academic arena alone is insufficient. The key is student retention, growth, and perpetuation. Brenden (1985) asserts that the "college's primary 'hold power' rests in the student's identification with the college" (p. 26). That means overcoming personal and institutional interferences which are causative of adult student attrition. Habley (cited in Brenden) professes "that delivery of quality advising services can make a major contribution to the creation of a staying environment" (p. 23). The entire milieu of the college environment needs to be responsive to an increasingly adult student body.

Research Study

As the statistics demonstrate, the majority of college returnees are female, therefore, researchers at several higher education institutions chose to survey this gender/age cohort and collect data regarding the following Null

hypotheses.

When the demographic data of age, marital status, parental status, employment status, level of responsibility at place of employment, education, part-time vs. full-time student status, degree sought, major, graduate vs. undergraduate standing, and school are considered:

- H - 1. There is no difference in the reasons women return to school in relation to demographic data.
- H - 2. There is no difference in services desired in relation to demographic data.
- H - 3. There is no difference in services found to be beneficial in relation to demographic data.
- H - 4. there is no difference in services desired and services provided.

Participants in the Study

The sample included women students, over the age of twenty-five, both graduate and undergraduate, who attended the following colleges: Fairleigh Dickinson University and Georgian Court College, both in New Jersey; Quinnipiac College in Connecticut, Trinity Christian College in Illinois, and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Of 419 questionnaires distributed, 383 were returned, for a response rate of 91 percent. This was not a random sample, therefore

no attempt is made to extrapolate the data to include all women students over the age of twenty-five. Rather, this research was exploratory. It examined the characteristics of women students in five colleges, the reasons they returned to school and the services they want and find beneficial.

Data Collection

The questionnaire used for this study contained fourteen items. In order to answer the question "Who are the women who return to college?" ten of the questionnaire items were demographic: age, marital status, parental status, employment status (unemployed or employed), full or part time employment, level of employment responsibility, education to date, student status (full or part-time), degree sought, and educational major. To answer our second question, "What do these women want?" three items were included on the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to identify the reason or reasons they had for returning to college and to identify the services they think colleges should provide. Finally they were asked to identify the services their college does provide which are especially beneficial.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Results are not reported in terms of a level of statistical significance, since the data were from a survey of an identified group (women students over age

twenty-five who attend one of the five colleges in the survey) and not from a random sample of a population of students. Rather, correlations of responses within and between respondents from each school were used as measures of relationship for this survey. The Contingency Coefficient was used for analyses of the relationship of the discrete nominal variables because it is the correlation coefficient appropriate for nominal data in a $k \times c$ contingency table. Hinkel, Wiersma and Jurs (1979) "Rule of Thumb for Interpreting the Size of a Correlation Coefficient" was the reference point for interpreting the strength of relationships indicated by the Contingency Coefficient (C). A "low" correlation is between .30 and .50; a "moderate" correlation is between .50 and .70; a "high" correlation is .70 to .90; and a "very high" correlation is above .90. As with many social science and educational data, few relationships above .50 were evident. Since even "low" correlations indicate relationships which may be worth further study or call for serious consideration, the decision to discuss correlations at .3 and above was made. Findings in this study are also reported in the form of descriptive statistics.

Findings

Demographics

To provide a picture of the respondents who participated in

this study, demographic data are presented before discussing specific findings. The average age of respondents was between 31 and 40, with 61 percent of them married. Most respondents were parents, with 5 percent being single parents and 41 percent having children still living at home. Of the 85 percent who were employed, 83 percent were employed full-time and 78 percent were in responsible positions where they had some impact in policy making. While 27 percent of respondents had completed only a high school diploma, 21 percent had earned associate degrees; 31 percent had baccalaureate degrees and 11 percent had completed a masters degree. Most respondents were part-time students. Seventeen percent were attending college full-time. Only 9 percent were not pursuing a degree. While 3 percent sought an associate degree, 53 percent were working towards a baccalaureate degree, 32 percent towards a masters degree and 4 percent towards a doctorate. Respondents represented a broad range of disciplines, with 28 percent in some area of education, 23 percent in business, 12 percent in social sciences, 4 percent in public administration, 6 percent in communication/English, 1 percent in fine arts, 5 percent in the physical sciences, 10 percent in a services area, and 12 percent in liberal arts/humanities. Thus, it is believed that the respondents in this sample provide a representative sample of students in most of our colleges and universities. Table 1 provides the demographic data for each school which participated in the study.

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 Insert Table 1 about here

Reasons for Returning to College

Respondents had returned to college for a number of reasons. Most respondents resumed their studies for the following three reasons, or combinations of reasons: 23 percent returned solely for career advancement, 25 percent wanted self-fulfillment in addition to career advancement, and 18 percent returned only for self-fulfillment. The selection, "career advancement", either alone or in combination with some other reason, accounted for the return to higher education of 56.2 percent of all respondents. The contingency coefficient (C) showed a low relationship between all of the demographic variables and reasons for returning to school. The actual patterns of responses in all these categories were more revealing than the strength of correlations indicated. Thus these patterns are discussed below for each demographic variable.

Age

When Age was related to the "reasons for returned to school" ($C = .40$), an interesting pattern emerged. Women ages twenty-five to thirty were more likely to have returned to college (38 %) to pursue career advancement and to attain self-fulfillment, while women over the age of fifty (47 %)

were more likely to have returned for self-fulfillment alone. Reasons were not so strongly evident for women between the ages of thirty-one to fifty. In the age group between the ages of thirty-one and forty, 22 percent returned to school for career advancement and 23 percent returned for a combination of career advancement and self-fulfillment. In the age group of forty-one to fifty, 24 percent returned for career advancement and 23 percent returned for self-fulfillment.

Marital Status

With $C = .47$, respondents' marital status and the reasons they returned to school also showed a relationship. "Career re-entry" was the reason for returning given by 30 percent of the widowed respondents, while an additional 30 percent returned solely for self-fulfillment. Surprisingly, 44 percent of the divorced women reported they returned to college for "self-fulfillment", while 33 percent returned because of the need for "career re-entry". Married women reported returning to college for a variety of reasons. Only 7 percent of the married students returned for reasons of "career re-entry", with only 1 percent of the single students returning for the same reason. Both married women and single women showed a striking similarity in the reasons they returned to college. "Career advancement" was the reason cited by 23 percent of both married and single respondents, "career advancement and self-fulfillment" were cited as the

reasons by 33 percent of the single and 25 percent of the married, while "self-fulfillment" alone was cited by 19 percent of the single respondents and 16 percent of the married. It is evident that a life crisis such as separation, divorce, or death prompts women to re-assess their lives and return to education. Previous studies have supported this contention. (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980).

Parental Status

Parental status also affects the reasons women return to school ($C = .48$). Single parents were more likely to return to advance their present careers (37 %) or for a career change (56 %). This is in striking contrast to parents of children over age eighteen, of whom a full 70 percent returned to college with self-fulfillment given as the only reason (42 %) or as one of the reasons (28 %). It appears that the "empty nest" syndrome may prompt the student to seek a new form of self-fulfillment in higher education.

Employment

Employment ($C = .48$) is positively correlated with the reasons one returns to school. Interestingly, 85 percent of the respondents were employed, and of that group, 82 percent were employed full-time. These are clearly motivated women who are striving to advance as their reasons for returning to school indicate. Among the unemployed, 75 percent are returning to school to prepare for career re-entry while

only 19 percent are returning for self-fulfillment. Among the employed, 66 percent are returning to school to advance their careers, 17 percent are returning for self-fulfillment alone, and an additional 28 percent have returned for both career advancement and self-fulfillment.

Level of Work Responsibility

Employed women in this study tended to be in responsible positions in their places of employment with 78 percent reporting some contribution to policy making within their organization. Of that group, 69 percent are returning to college to advance their careers even further.

Education Attained to Date

Current educational level showed a positive correlation ($C = .43$) with reasons for returning to school. Only about half of the respondents (183) had not yet completed a baccalaureate degree. Of that group, 50 percent are returning to school for career advancement, 13 percent for career change, and 14 percent for career re-entry. Of the 103 respondents who already have a baccalaureate degree, 72 percent are returning to college for career advancement. The remaining respondents did not indicate their level of education. A summary of the reasons respondents gave for returning to higher education is presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Desirable Services

A moderate correlation ($C = .50$) exists between the services respondents want and the college they attend. These are services which the colleges do not currently provide, or provide inadequately, in the estimation of the respondent. Interestingly, only 40 percent of the total respondents identified service delivery inadequacies at the schools. By school, this group was as follows: 52 percent at the University of Nebraska/Omaha (UNO), 28 percent at Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU), 26 percent at Georgian Court College (GCC), 57 percent at Quinnipiac College (QC), and 14 percent at Trinity College (TC). The following may not, therefore, indicate a lack of desirable services. Rather, it may indicate that this particular sub-set of respondents are not as well informed as their counterparts.

Of all services identified, respondents requested a greater variety of night and weekend courses more often than they did any other service. At the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), 26 percent of the students wanted more night and weekend offerings, while at both Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) and Georgian Court College (GCC) 39 percent desired them, as did 41 percent at Quinnipiac College (QC). Improved job placement assistance was requested by 16 percent of all respondents: 18 percent at UNO, 28 percent at FDU, 11 percent at GCC and 12 percent at QC. At TC

students did not identify either of these elements as service needs. Only 8 percent of the respondents asked that faculty and administrators maintain night office hours: 14 percent at UNO, 6 percent at FDU, 5 percent at GCC and 6 percent at TC. At all schools except FDU, a few students asked that mentors and tutors be provided: 6 percent at UNO, 3 percent at GCC, 12 percent at QC, and 34 percent at TC. Even fewer students had a problem with the registration procedures at the colleges in this study: 8 percent at UNO and 3 percent at GCC.

A facility for child care was a most frequently identified service need. Respondents at all schools asked for this service as follows: 8 percent at UNO, 28 percent at FDU, 23 percent at GCC, 6 percent at QC, and 33 percent at TC. This is not surprising when one considers that 46 percent of the respondents are parents of young children.

Better information about college course offerings was requested by 4 percent of this group of respondents at UNO and GCC and by 33 percent of those at TC. Better financial aid assistance was identified as a service need by 8 percent at UNO, 11 percent at GCC, and 18 percent at QC. Some students asked for expanded library, health and computer services: 10 percent at UNO, 2 percent at GCC and 6 percent at TC. One service which none of the schools provide was requested by a Trinity College student. She asked that the college establish a dating service. A summary of services

requested is presented in Table 3.

 Insert Table 3 about here

Provided Services which are Beneficial

A moderate correlation ($C = .59$) was found between the services students found to be beneficial and the schools they attend. Again, not all respondents identified beneficial services, perhaps confirming that students lack information about available services. Only 30 percent of the total respondents were able to identify services they found to be beneficial. By school, this group was as follows: UNO - 31 percent, FDU - 28 percent, GCC - 30 percent, QC - 40 percent, and TC - 24 percent.

Registration procedures were reported to be beneficial by 19 percent of UNO respondents and 4 percent from GCC (these schools and FDU offer an early mail-in registration opportunity for their students). Only one student identified child care as a beneficial service. This respondent attends UNO, which is the only one of the five schools to offer an on-campus child care facility. Its services, however, are only available during the day, and many of the UNO respondents are night students. Other services thought to be beneficial by respondents at UNO include: advising (19 %), computer facility (13 %), special course arrangements (2 %), student recreation facilities (13 %), parking garage

(1 %), flexible course scheduling (23 %), and financial assistance (3 %). At FDU, students found two services of particular benefit: 56 percent found the SUCCESS adult degree program beneficial and 44 percent reported that the advising system is particularly helpful. GCC provides a number of services which respondents identified as beneficial. In addition to the 4 percent which appreciated the registration procedures, 34 percent found the advising system beneficial, 10 percent appreciated the library, 36 percent valued the RE-ENTRY program, 12 percent liked the flexible class scheduling, and 4 percent found financial assistance beneficial. Services identified as beneficial at QC include the advising system (75 %), the library (8 %), and flexible class scheduling (17 %). At TC, 60 percent of the students appreciated the advising and 20 percent found both the library and flexible class scheduling to be beneficial. Table 4 summarizes the services respondents reported as being beneficial.

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 Insert table 4 about here

Comparison of Service Needs and Services Found Beneficial

Although only 100 respondents (26 %) identified both service needs and beneficial services, a high correlation ($C = .73$) exists between the services these students desire and the services they find to be beneficial. Of all respondents,

only two (less than 1 %) identified financial aid as beneficial, while 65 (17 %) identified financial assistance as a service needed. Respondents at four of the colleges asked for job placement assistance. Respondents also requested mentors and tutors, expanded child care, library, health and computer services. Only 30 percent of the respondents were aware of support services in the institutions.

Interesting patterns do exist. Respondents who identified "child care" as a service need also found the following services to be beneficial: advising, library and computer services, flexible scheduling and financial assistance. Those who identified "flexible scheduling" as a service needed, identified beneficial services as: ease of registration, off-campus courses, and library and computer facilities. Those who wanted offices to be open nights also benefited from advising, library and computer services, off-campus courses and flexible scheduling. Those who needed financial aid identified as beneficial: advising, off-campus courses, and flexible scheduling.

Summary and Conclusions

A picture is emerging of a group of very active women with limited time to accomodate school attendance. These are women who seek advice and need support: emotionally through mentors and other women students, academically through

advising, and financially through formalized financial aid programs. Among them, there are those who also need a means to care for their children while they attend classes. It would appear that many view success as contingent upon their expertise, as they lack access to the "old-boy networks". It is clear that these women see higher education as a means of improving their career opportunities while also providing them with a sense of self-fulfillment.

The results of this study are significant in that they have implications for further consideration by institutions of higher learning, alerting educators to the reality that colleges and universities can no longer direct the majority of their recruiting efforts and their services only to the traditional-aged college student population. In so doing, they neglect the growing number of adults who are returning to the campus and who bring with them a clear sense of purpose and a new vitality. Institutions that respond, providing a supportive environment and implementing academic strategies and services that address the needs of this emerging cohort, will also experience a revitalization and a sense of mission accomplished.

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Table 1

Variable	Category	DEMOGRAPHICS					
		Total	Percent Respondents				
			UNO	FDU	GCC	QC	TC
Age	25-30	27 %	38 %	28 %	21 %	28 %	26 %
	31-40	40	36	36	43	35	48
	41-50	28	23	25	34	35	26
	50 +	5	4	12	26	6	0
Marital Status	single	20	23	19	17	27	29
	married	61	68	52	63	50	57
	separated	2	0	5	4	0	0
	divorced	14	8	20	13	23	14
	widowed	3	1	5	4	0	0
Parental Status	no children	39	43	40	33	57	35
	single parent	5	3	3	7	0	10
	dependent children	41	45	32	46	13	55
	adult children	15	9	24	14	30	0
Employment status	unemployed	15	12	10	17	7	43
	employed	85	88	90	83	93	37
Time employed	part-time	18	20	8	21	4	50
	full-time	83	80	92	79	96	50
Work responsibilities							
	suggest & implement policy	28	18	32	28	48	46
	suggest policy	19	22	22	16	11	31
	contribute to policy	31	42	28	28	26	8
	no direct contribution	22	18	18	28	15	15
Highest education	high school	27	0	65	19	73	33
	Associate degree	21	0	18	34	13	43
	Bachelors degree	31	74	2	26	0	0
	Masters degree	11	23	6	8	0	0
	Other	10	3	9	13	14	24
Student status	part-time	83	89	98	80	93	11
	full-time	17	11	2	20	7	89
Degree sought	AS	3	0	0	1	30	0
	BA/BS	53	0	97	59	67	91
	MA/MS/MBA/MPA	32	80	0	25	0	5
	PhD	4	7	0	4	0	4
	Other	9	13	3	11	3	0
Major	Education/counseling	28	55	2	26	0	5
	Business	23	12	29	21	77	0
	Social sciences	12	3	20	16	0	19
	Public Administration	4	1	0	8	0	0
	Communication/English	7	9	20	8	0	0
	Fine arts	1	0	1	1	0	0
	Physical/hard sciences	5	3	0	9	4	0
	Services (gerontology, social work, etc.)	10	17	0	8	19	0
	Liberal arts	12	0	25	9	0	76
	(includes Christian studies)						

Table 2
REASONS FOR RETURNING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Reason	Total	Percent Respondents					TC
		UNO	FDU	GCC	QC		
Career re-entry	6 %	5 %	5 %	8 %	0	10 %	
Career re-entry & career change	1	0	0	2	0	0	
Career re-entry & career advancement	1	1	0	1	0	0	
Career re-entry & self-fulfillment	5	1	7	5	0	5	
Career Change	7	7	3	9	7	5	
Career change & career advancement	2	3	2	0	0	0	
Career change & self-fulfillment	4	4	0	5	0	5	
Career advancement	23	28	19	24	10	19	
Self-fulfillment	18	5	36	15	40	14	
Career advancement & self-fulfillment	25	32	20	23	30	19	
Career re-entry, career change, career advancement & self-fulfillment	.52	0	0	2	0	1	
Career re-entry, career change & self-fulfillment	2	2	2	2	0	5	
Coercion	.40	1	0	0	0	0	

Table 3
SERVICES REQUESTED

Service	Total	Percent Respondents				
		UNO	FDU	GCC	QC	TC
More frequent course offerings	33 %	26 %	39 %	39 %	41 %	0 %
Job placement assistance	16	18	28	11	12	0
Flexible office hours (faculty & administrators)	8	14	6	5	6	0
Mentors	5	6	0	3	12	34
Improved registration procedures	4	8	0	3	0	0
Child care	16	8	28	23	6	33
More information	4	4	0	4	0	33
Better financial aid assistance	9	8	0	11	18	0
Expanded library & computer service	5	10	0	2	0	6

Table 4
CURRENT SERVICES WHICH ARE BENEFICIAL

Service	Percent Respondents					
	Total	UNO	FDU	GCC	QC	TC
Early registration	7 %	19 %	0	4 %	0	0
Child care	1	3	0	0	0	0
Job placement assistance / advising	37	19	44	34	75	60
Library & computer services	9	13	0	10	8	20
Special course arrangements						
Off campus		3	0	0	0	0
SUCCESS		0	56	0	0	0
RE-Entry		0	0	36	0	0
Recreation services	3	13	0	0	0	0
Flexible class scheduling	14	23	0	12	17	20
Financial aid	3	3	0	4	0	0
Parking facilities	1	1	0	0	0	0